

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

AUGUST 1, 2021

ROMANS 12: 9

“GENUINE LOVE; BRAVE LOVE”

St. Paisios wrote about something that happened back in the early centuries of Christianity when the Desert Fathers led lives of prayer in monasteries and hermitages in the wilderness areas of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. They fasted strictly and ate very little. One day a traveler stopped at the hut of a hermit named Abba Macarius. They visited a little and, as the traveler left, he gave Macarius a gift-----a large bunch of beautiful grapes. Instead of eating them, Macarius walked to a hut a few miles away where Abba Joseph lived. He figured Abba Joseph was hungrier than he was and gave him the grapes. Abba Joseph didn't eat them because he thought about another hermit a ways away—Abba Michael---and decided to go give him the grapes. Abba Michael didn't eat them because he was worried that another hermit not too far away—Abba James---needed food. So he delivered the grapes to him..... On and on this went through several more monks until one of them happened to bring them back to Macarius, not knowing that's where they had started from! Macarius did eat them this time, and gave thanks to God for how wonderful it is when monks truly love each other! (St. Paisios, Spiritual Counsels #4, Holy Monastery of the Evangelist John, 2012, p. 123)

Love for others is a beautiful thing! In today's epistle lesson, we will look at just four words and they are about love. St. Paul wrote in Romans 12:9---“Let love be genuine.”

St. Paul wrote this epistle to the Christian parish in Rome, but, of course, these 4 words are for all of us to hear and follow. Genuine love is different than self-serving love. Self-serving love is when we love someone because they love us, too; or because they are “loveable”. But genuine love goes beyond that to love people who aren't very loveable, whom we have nothing in common with, with whom we disagree, people whom it's even hard for us to spend time with, people who show no love back to us.

Loving that way requires genuine love, self-sacrificing love.

And sometimes love needs to be brave---doing whatever it takes to show

love for someone else even when it's very hard, even dangerous to do so. And that means to not quit loving when it gets hard-----that requires brave love. which is genuine love.

St. Paul, who wrote these 4 little words, is a great example of genuine and brave love. Some years after he wrote this letter to the Roman Christians, he ended up himself in Rome under house arrest. He had already led a life where his love for others, which led to his leading his life in spreading the gospel of Christ, caused him much suffering---jail, beatings, floggings, shipwreck, poverty, etc.

And now the decision came down from the Roman authorities---Paul was sentenced to decapitation. Now if St. Paul's love had not been really genuine and brave, we could imagine him going to the authorities saying, "You know, I want to keep my head. How about if we cut a deal? I promise to go live in the countryside somewhere in isolation-----no more missionary work, no more preaching, no more epistles---and you let me keep my head."

No, Paul's love was genuine and brave. So as his final expression of that love in this world, he stayed true and submitted to the axe.

Is our love genuine like that of the Holy Apostle Paul?

Is our love brave like that of the Holy Apostle Paul?

Let me give you two examples of genuine and brave love in more modern times.

First, St. Maria Skobtsova----As a young woman, she, like many others, fled Russia after the Communists took over in 1917. Like many Russian exiles, she ended up in Paris. Some years later, she became a nun. Mother Maria's monastic life was unlike most. She did not live in a regular convent, but dedicated her life to caring for the poor of Paris. Clothing, food, helping them in any way she could---something like the work of our own St. Herman Shelter here in Cleveland.

In 1940 the Germans conquered France. And after a while the Nazis began rounding up the Parisian Jews to send them east to the concentration camps where most would be murdered. Mother Maria now devoted her life to saving as many Jews as possible. She hid them, she arranged for them to hide in the countryside, she arranged for some to sneak out to countries not under Nazi rule..... No one knows how many she saved from death, but it was a lot of lives. Eventually, the Nazis figured out what was going on and she was arrested and sent to a concentration camp herself---to Ravensbruck.

As the war drew to a close in the spring of 1945 Allied forces were nearing

the area where the camp was. The Nazis decided to speed up executions of the prisoners to get more killed before the camp fell. It was Holy Week—some sources say Good Friday, others say Holy Saturday. The prisoners assigned to die that day were lined up, heading for the gas chambers. Mother Maria was not on that day's list. She saw in the line a young woman and her heart went out to her. She went to the guards and asked if she could take the young woman's place. The guards agreed---they returned the young woman to the barracks and Mother Maria died in the gassing that day.

Mother Maria could have thought to herself on that holy day---“The camp will be liberated very soon. If I can just lay low somehow for a little while, maybe I won't end up getting killed and will get set free when the Allies arrive.” But she didn't think that way. Instead, she showed incredibly genuine love and incredibly brave love and took the young woman's place.

Second---Father Dimitri Klepinin. He also ended up in Paris after the Bolshevik Revolution. He became a priest---married with 2 children. He was actually a friend of St. Maria. And, as a priest, during the years of Nazi occupation he did similar things to what St. Maria did. In his parish, he hid Jews, snuck them into the countryside, got them out of the country. Again, who knows how many lives he saved? Many!

The Nazis began to notice that there was something going on and intervened. A Gestapo officer came calling on Father Dimitri one day and said, “Father, I know what you are doing! I don't have proof yet, and being you are a priest, I think I will give you a break, if you cooperate..... If you will solemnly promise, on your honor as a priest, that whether or not you have already been helping Jews, that you will never again help one of these horrible Jews---then I will not arrest you!” Father Dimitri held up in his hand the large crucifix he wore around his neck. He pointed at the figure of Jesus on the cross, and said to the Nazi—“And what should I do about *this* Jew?” The Gestapo officer was very angered by this answer and it was obvious the priest would not quit helping Jews. And so he arrested Father Dimitri. Soon he was sent to a concentration camp, to Buchenwald, where he soon died.

Both Mother Maria and Father Dimitri were later canonized as Saints in our Orthodox Church.

Genuine love is brave love---being willing to act in love for others even when it is very difficult to do so. Genuine love is self-sacrificial love---being willing to do not what is best for me, but what is best for others.

Maybe for us we will be called to show genuine and brave love in less dramatic ways than St. Maria and St. Dimitri (although who knows?).

Probably our opportunities will come in our normal daily lives----with our spouses, with our relatives, with our co-workers, with our fellow parishioners, etc. Watch for opportunities to show genuine and brave love----when you see one, ask God's help and act in love.

As you strive to do that, remember the three examples of love I have told you about this morning---St. Paul, St. Maria, and St. Dimitri. Of course, they now live in glory and joy in the presence of God. And you know what they do there---they pray. And as I often tell you when I tell you about a Saint-----if St. Paul, St. Maria, and St. Dimitri are praying to God in his very presence, wouldn't you like to be on their prayer lists? Ask for them to pray for you that God will help you to follow their example of genuine and brave love.